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THE VINTNER'S BUSH.

A SURVIVAL OF TWENTY CENTURIES.

He that will an ale-house keep,
 Must three things have in store ;
 A hogshead of ale his guests to regale,
 And a *bush* to hang at his door.
 A hostess to fill the tankard at will,
 And what can a man wish more ?

A VERY long period in folk-history must elapse before a custom of minor importance can become engrafted on the language in the trite form of a proverb ; hence a proverbial saying, found current in Roman writers of the first century B. C., carries back the fact or the thought it embodies to a far remoter date. And when we find that this venerable conception makes itself manifest in similar and even identical forms at the present day, we may confidently claim that it is one of the most ancient exhibits of folk-lore extant.

This claim applies to the use of branches of shrubs or of trees hung before the door of a tavern or wine-shop to announce the sale of wine to the illiterate yet thirsty passer-by ; allusion to this custom is made by Publius Syrus, the celebrated composer of mimes under Julius Cæsar, who wrote, about 45 B. C., a series of maxims now largely neglected. Maxim 968 reads thus :—

You need not hang up the ivy branch
 Over wine that sells well.

And Columella, the writer on agriculture, composed about five years later an essay entitled, “*De re rustica*,” in which he expresses the same idea more tersely :—

Vino vendibili hedera non opus est.

This proverb has passed into many languages ; the Italians say :—

Al buono vino non bisogna frasca ;

and the French :—

A bon vin il ne faut point de bouchon ;

while the usual English form is :—

Good wine needs no bush.

The Latin original of this widely dispersed saying shows us that the Romans made use of the ivy, the plant sacred to their wine-god Bacchus, a distinct variety of which bears his name. Around this plant clustered many superstitions ; it was commonly believed that Bacchus taught those overtaken with frenzy (a euphemism for delirium tremens) to crown themselves with wreaths of ivy to prevent

evil consequences; ivy cooked in wine was thought to be a useful remedy for ulcers and burns; and it was claimed that a cup freshly cut from the wood of the ivy could be used to ascertain whether wine placed in it had been adulterated with water, for the wine, they asserted, would filter through, leaving the water; but later philosophers taught the contrary, that the ivy-cup would retain the wine and allow the water to trickle through, no one ever dreaming of testing the truth of either statement experimentally. All parts of the plant were used medicinally, the leaves, the bark, and the gum that exudes.

To the early inhabitants of the Italian peninsula, therefore, the ivy had special significance, and was recognized as an appropriate sign for calling attention to the popular beverage; in the course of time ivy became more difficult to obtain, and the uneducated wine merchant gathered for the purpose branches of any conveniently growing shrub. Eventually the significance of the fresh bough was lost sight of and arbitrary substitutes employed, so now the visitor to North Italy¹ sees the taverners using branches of a great variety of trees, wreaths of box, bunches of straw, and of spiral wood-shavings. Exactly how a certain variant gets started it is impossible to say, but in the country districts it evidently follows well established lines of travel, becoming common in a certain province or even a single valley.

The simple branches of trees and shrubs used by taverners must not be confounded with similar leafy boughs employed in summer around the doors and open windows of vendors of meat, and of hucksters, intended to attract flies and to keep them from contaminating the wares offered for sale.

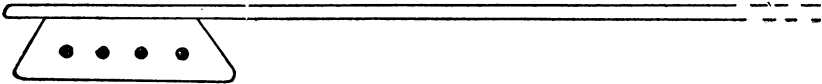
In Valtellina the "bush" takes the form of a wreath of box or of straw, but I have seen more commonly large bunches of wood-shavings, symmetrically cut in spirals often three feet long and as large as a big wasp's nest; these are ingeniously made by cutting the shaving at the end of a stout piece of soft wood in such a manner that each curl remains attached to the butt, which is about two and a half inches in diameter, and from which they hang in graceful folds. This particular style is seen in the narrow *Calle* of Venice, and on the journey northward through Cadore into the valley of the Piave; in front of the principal *osterie* of each village, stretching along both sides of the well-kept highways, hangs the *frasca* recognizable by even the least intelligent of the peasants. Near Belluno I noticed a truly singular way of perpetuating the primary idea, an imitation bunch of spiral shavings made of cast-iron and warranted not to rot or to mildew.

¹ I vainly searched for the "bush" in Naples.

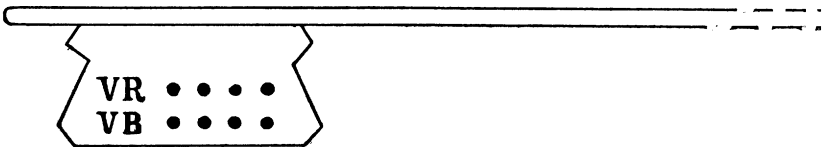
The bunches of wooden curls abound on the Italian slope of the Alps, and cease to be used immediately on crossing the Austrian frontier ; the contrast between their universal use in the Italian valley and their total absence in the Austrian village of Cortina, only three and a half miles across the frontier, is very striking. The custom is also lacking in the important valley of Cordevole, a tributary of the Piave, but the former ends in a mountain pass and forms a cul-de-sac, while the latter is a thoroughfare, showing that this folk-custom follows the lines of communication most frequented.

In the province of Venezia I observed wreaths of straw two and one half feet in diameter encircling a tassel of the same material. In the province of Umbria the bush takes a very peculiar form ; to one end of a long slender stick is attached a thin hatchet-shaped block of wood, on which are painted a row of small black balls, four or five in number ; the balls indicate the price at which the wine is sold, four or five *soldi* the litre.

These signs are seen fastened to the door-posts of the *osterie* in the picturesque town of Assisi on the slopes of Monte Subasio ; the



more common style is that here first given ; a few had the shape of the second cut, with the initials V R and V B prefixed to the rows



of balls denoting *vino rosso* and *vino bianco* respectively.

To determine through what avenues this custom reached distant parts of the Roman Empire is a problem difficult of solution, but if conjecture is permissible it is easy to surmise that the Imperial armies carried with them knowledge of home methods, which were profitably adopted in the new lands through which the thirsty warriors marched ; it is hardly surprising, then, to find that the "bush" in some form has been used in many parts of the Continent and in Great Britain, at periods when tokens were more easily interpreted than printed signs. In those countries where education of the masses has made most progress, these interesting relics of former illiteracy have vanished.

In France "cabaretiers" hang before their shops branches of a

variety of vines and trees, those most commonly used are ivy (*lierre*), holly (*houx*), fir (*sapin*), box (*buis*), and mistletoe (*gui*), also straw; the "bush" is called "bouchon" (*bouchon de cabaret*), and this is used metonymically for a tavern :—

Il n'y a dans ce village qu'un mauvais bouchon.

The only legal recognition of the bush that I have encountered is an edict promulgated February, 1415, by the king of France, the "well-beloved" Charles VI.; he announced that the *couronne*, or *cerceau*, should be used only by those who sold wine perfumed with *sauge* (sage) or *romarin* (rosemary).

In Germany the custom seems to be less in vogue, possibly because the Roman legions met with more stubborn resistance at the hands of the Germans than elsewhere, and the inhabitants were less disposed to adopt customs introduced by their conquerors. The bush is now commonly replaced by an arbitrary sign, consisting of a six-pointed star (two intersecting triangles), made of wood or metal, sometimes having a wine-cup rudely painted at the centre. One writer, noticing this, describes it in the following language :—

This widely known pentacle is formed of the union of the luminous with the obscure triangle, and constitutes Solomon's seal in the Kabbala ; it is the image of life, also of inebriety exalting the luminous faculties of the soul at the same time that it increases the weaknesses and misery of the body, and is properly used to indicate places devoted to the modern worship of Bacchus.

The use of the leafy bough is referred to by Karl Ferdinand Gutzkow, the popular dramatist :—

In den tannen-bekränzten Wirthshäusern.

The English proverb, "Good wine needs no bush," seems to have no analogue in German. Of course it can be rendered "Guter Wein braucht keinen Kranz," but this mere translation ; in Schlegel's version of "As You Like It" it reads, "Dass der guter Wein keines Kranzes bedarf."

The frequent references to the use of the "bush" found in English literature prove that it was formerly more universal than at present ; indeed its history can be imperfectly traced *per saltum* through these literary fragments.

The early poet Geoffrey Chaucer wrote :—

A garland hadde he sette upon his hedde
As grete as it were for an Ale-stake.

This designation of ale-stake is also used by Thomas More one hundred and forty years later :—

Set up for a bare signe, as a taverner's bush or tapster's ale-stake.

(Confut. Tindale, 1532.)

Citing the passages in chronological order, we find that the poet George Gascoigne, courtier to Queen Elizabeth, wrote in 1575 :—

Now adays the good wine needeth none ivye garlande.

(Glass of Government.)

— an almost literal translation of the adage of Columella.

From the “*Accidens of Armorie*,” written at the end of the sixteenth century by Gerard Leigh, we take a peculiarly appropriate paragraph. He wrote in 1591 :—

The common saying is that an ivie bush is hanged at the tavern door to declare the wine within, but the nice searchers of curious questions affirme this is the secret cause, for that tree by his native property fashioned into a drinking vessel plainly describeth unto the eye the subtle art of the vintner in mingling licors, which else would lightly deceive the thirsty drinker’s taste.

A few years later, 1598, Shakespeare made the old proverb familiar by citing it in the Epilogue to “*As You Like It* : ” —

If it be true that good wine needs no bush, ’t is true that a good play needs no epilogue ; yet to good wine they do use good bushes, and good plays prove the better by help of good epilogues.

In the seventeenth century references to the bush are too frequent to demand further quotation.

Like the three balls of the pawnbroker, the parti-colored poles and metallic basins of the barber-surgeons, the bush of the taverner was a trade emblem that took the place of signboards prior to days of popular education ; the knowledge of the alphabet was limited to the few, the articles advertised were intended for the many.

Henry Carrington Bolton.